

https://dspace.org/

The selection of a third language, with specific reference to the value of Latin

Davies, E. Huw

1974
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27520
Davies, E.H. (1973/1974). The selection of a third language, with specific reference to the value of Latin. Symposium: A Journal of Education for Southern Africa, pp. 71-73.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

the selection of a third language, with specific reference to the value of latin

E. H. DAVIES

Let us examine very briefly some of the considerations which have to be made where the provision of a third language is concerned. It is fairly obvious, I think, that the nature of the material with which we have to work must be a paramount consideration. The provision of a third language has, as one of its basic assumptions, that there are, in fact, pupils who have both the requisite level of intellectual ability in order to master the language in question and, at the same time—and at least as important—that they have the interest, or feel a need, for the specific subject offering.

One encounters here the traditional 'chicken-and egg' dilemma. A language is to be offered in a school. Those who are to offer the language have been trained in the University, an institution whose needs and goals may be very different from those of the school. Whose ends are to be served? Is there a dissonance of ends insofar as the essentially academic aims of the University and the essentially pragmatic aims of the school can be seen to clash? The University requires an influx of students who display particular skills and talents — a range of skills and talents which maybe are not necessarily consonant with those which are required by the larger world of business and industry, or of society in general — and herein lies the problem. Traditionally, the third language in the Transvaal has been offered on a level which presupposes that the pupil is proposing to prosecute further study in that field in a University — an assumption which is, in the majority of cases, unfounded. The fact that the expectations of academics, pupils and teachers are ultimately frustrated is hardly to be thought surprising.

Assuming that teachers of the necessary ability and talent can be found and trained; assuming that the necessary facilities exist in schools; and making the hundred and one other presuppositions which are necessary to the provision of any course in the school curriculum does not, however, take account of one of the most basic presuppositions of all — the presupposition that there is some merit in offering the relevant subject.

We are in the realm of value judgments, for, after all, the provision of any subject is inextricably bound up with the whole question of values. This, presumably, is why we consider it to be more worthwhile to offer, say, English, Mathematics and Science in school rather than Bridge, Bingo and Billiards, despite the fact that the latter could possibly provide the entreé to far more lucrative forms of activity than those presupposed by instruction in the more conventional subjects.

Let us acknowledge that the 'values' which we may uphold as valid reasons for the presentation of any subject in a school are not, and cannot be demonstrable other than, possibly, in terms of the practical consequences they may have for the student of the subject. Has the study of Latin any value at all? Thorstein Veblen in his **Theory of the Leisure Class** writes '. . . the ability to use and understand certain of the dead languages of Southern Europe is not only gratifying to the person who finds occasion to parade his accomplishments in this respect, but the evidence of such knowledge serves at the same time to recommend any savant to his audience . . . Indeed, there can be little doubt that it is their utility as evidence of wasted time and effort, and hence of the pecuniary strength necessary in order to afford this waste, that has secured to the classics their prerogative position in the scheme of higher learning . . .' Even if we are charitable, and assume that Veblen has never heard of Erasmus and the rise of the humanistic tradition — a tradition which persists to the present day — even if we assume that his Socialist leanings are getting the better of him, we are still confronted with the assertion that the classics signify 'a waste of time and effort'.

Postman and Weingartner in **Teaching as a Subversive Activity** contend that 'there are thousands of teachers who believe that there are certain subjects that are 'inherently

good', that are 'good in themselves', that are 'good for their own sake'. When you ask 'good for whom?' or 'good for what' you will be dismissed as being merely practical . . . There are thousands of teachers who teach subjects like (Latin) because **they** are inclined to enjoy talking about such matters . . .' You may reject entirely the position of the two gentlemen I have quoted—but they ask questions to which we should be able to provide the answers. The questions were 'good for whom?' and 'good for what purpose?', and it is to possible answers to these questions that we shall later be addressing ourselves.

Even Stephen Leacock has had a dig at Classicists, albeit in the kindest possible way. 'I was myself trained as a classical scholar. It seemed the only thing to do with me. I acquired such a singular felicity in handling Latin and Greek that I could take a page of either of them, distinguish which it was by merely glancing at them, and with the help of a dictionary and a pair of compasses, whip off a translation of it in less than three hours . . .' A scholar as eminent as McCrum has pointed out that there must be something wrong when a class of normal boys, asked to comment on some lines from the 'Idylls' of Theocritus, can make not comment at all other than to point out that there is an example of an incorrectly used genitive.

Latin for whom and why

All of us should be convinced of the value of our subject. We are also concerned at the rapid decline of the support for Latin in schools. Even a cursory examination of figures reveals that there has been a rapid falloff which seems to indicate that Latin has no value or, that it is too difficult, or, perhaps, that we are teaching it badly.

Can we answer the questions posited by Postman and Weingartner? "For whom is Latin good? For what purpose is Latin good?" We have here the obvious distinction to make between the subject as **an end in itself** and the subjevt as a means to some or other end.

Why do we teach Latin anyway? There have been any number of answers given over the years. As long ago as 1935 C. W. Valentine, in his **Latin: its place and value in education** was quick to attack certain defences of Latin teaching in British schools and Universities. He attacked many of the so-called 'utilitarian' arguments of his day on the grounds that there was insufficient justification for them. Some people would assure us that the reason for studying Latin is that it helps your English'; that 'it makes you think logically'; that 'it helps you with the derivation of words', and so on.

A South African writes 'During three successive Latin lessons at the beginning of this year, Jeremy, with all the maturity of a Standard Six boarder, posed the following thought-provoking and far reaching question: "My dad wants to know when I can stop learning Latin". Jeremy's dad has not yet realised that Latin is not studied for the sake of learning Latin . . . For Jeremy, as for thousands of others, there seems no purpose in the study of Latin. Despite the argument "Latin develops your mind" we remain unable to sway opinion because the existence of a mind is, perhaps mistakenly, taken for granted. Jeremy has since been told that he is not learning Latin because it trains his mind to be like a filing-cabinet. My approach to Latin is not to it as a language . . . but to Latin as a mental discipline.

Henry Sidgwick wrote in 1867 'A boy's memory (as an advocate exultingly phrases it) is "stored with previous things", that is, stored with long words, salient extravagances and mannerisms . . .' R. R. Bolgar has contended that 'it is shocking how often one has met monstrosities like "The classical authors condemn all false ornament, all tinsel, all ungraceful and unshapely work . . ." as if there were no false ornament in Aeschylus, no tinsel in Ovid, no ungracefulness in Thucydides which even the untutored taste of the young could perceive'.

Peters contends that 'it would be a waste of time to take seriously the utilitarian arguments for learning classics which have been put forward. Classics is obviously a nonstarter, if looked at in terms of its usefulness in training people for employment in a modern industrial society. Arguments about . . . lawyer's jargon . . . have a hollow ring about them, and there is no evidence that the civil service is better staffed by students of the classics than by students of Mathematics or Chinese . . .'

The argument here is, therefore, not that the so-called utilitarian arguments are meaningless or even untrue. What is being contend-

ed is that there must surely be more cogent reasons than those of **mental training?** It has been argued that the transfer effects of Latin are small indeed; nevertheless, they may be a useful 'fringe benefit'. But courses in logic, additional English and so on would be far more direct ways of accomplishing what some writers seem to hope Latin would be able to bring about.

You will notice that I have avoided very carefully the question as to whether or not Latin has intrinsic value. I have done this on the grounds that this again is a contingent question — although one could never presume to teach the subject on these grounds.

The value of Latin as a means to an end has been the topic under discussion, and what I am contending is that perhaps we need to have another look at the **ends** we are pursuing. I have suggested that certain stated ends, while possibly of value, should not be seen as the **major ends** of our teaching.

Latin and Humanitas

It is possible to set up ends other than those which are directly related to the language itself? I contend that it is, in fact, possible. T. J. Haarhoff himself made the rather acid comment ‚Maar laat ons al dadelik ontken dat enige taal wat die menslike hart kan laat vinniger klop „dood" is in die sin dat dit alleen maar goed is vir grammatikale ontleding en die pyniging van skoolkinders'. It was Haarhoff's contention that Latin should be taught as a means to the pursuit of **Humanitas.**

In 1928 Marouzeau made the point that 'it is far more significant to have an alert reader who knows how to interpret Cicero than a painstaking pupil who, as a result of all his school- years might be able to turn a page of Montesquieu into the Latin of Cicero'.

We are still concerned with Latin as a **means to an end,** of course, but what is being urged is that there be a reconsideration of the end we have in mind. There is at present in Britain and the United States of America a feeling that the language should be seen merely as a key to the culture, and no more. The question that will by now be looming large in the minds of readers is whether the language can be taught by any means other than those which we are at present using. I contend that it can in fact be taught faster and better, bearing in mind the purposes to which it would be put.

Students seem to be able to satisfy the requirements for Greek and Hebrew at University level without any school experience of the language. Why should not Latin suffer the same fate? I mentioned the apparent clash between the aims of the school and the requirements of the University, more especially where the presentation of the third language is concerned. Obviously precision and understanding must come. Whether they are needed in the same way by the average school child as they are needed by the average University student is a debatable point. If the aims of the teaching of Latin are purely academic; if the 'value' of the subject is to be seen in terms of the linguistic exercises that it provides, then I see no reason why Latin should not join Greek and Hebrew as a subject which is the special preserve of the University.

But if we are concerned with the spreading of Haarhoff's **humanitas,** we are concerned with an entirely different matter. Then we are concerned with conveying all that is best in the Classics to the mass of pupils who will never darken the door of the University. And here lies the true value of the classics. Not that they discipline the mind; not that they help one's English; not that they give one a mind rather like a filing cabinet — however useful these side effects may be. We have great opportunities for propagating all that is most worthwhile in the classics.

Many of us are concerned about what seems to be a sinking ship. Three students this year are training to be Latin teachers at the Johannesburg College of Education, The University of the Witwatersrand has about the same number. Teaching posts are becoming fewer and fewer. Enrolments are falling. Let me conclude in the words of the English writer Thorpe:

'Our critics are sometimes mean, jealous and ignorant, but very often they are men of integrity and wide sympathy whose strictures are the more bitter because they see as clearly as we do the great potential of our subject. They face us with a noble challenge and we must not refuse it; we must not be afraid of change, and we may yet cheat the gallows'.